

Salvadoran's Death in Iraq Leaves His Mother Fuming

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SAN SALVADOR, Jan. 21 — From her hillside home in western [El Salvador](#), Herminia Ramos sobbed and sobbed the other day as she recalled her fallen son.

In some ways, Ms. Ramos is like the thousands of other Salvadoran mothers who lost children in the 12-year civil war here that ended in 1992. But Ms. Ramos' grief is fresher than the rest, the result of a more recent conflict.

El Salvador is the only country in Latin America with troops in [Iraq](#), a point of pride for President Antonio Saca, who is a gung-ho supporter of the Bush administration, but extremely unpopular among the war-weary population.

“Our army should be at home,” said Ms. Ramos, 48, fuming against a war she said she did not know the first thing about until smartly dressed officers showed up at her home in 2004 to inform her that her son, Natividad, had become the first Salvadoran to die in combat in Iraq.

The United States has been debating for years the reasons for the war in Iraq and whether the invasion and continued presence of troops there are justified. Was there reason to believe that weapons of mass destruction were there? Was [Saddam Hussein](#)'s despotism enough reason to topple him? Did links between Iraq and [Al Qaeda](#) exist?

El Salvador, which has been involved in the war since August 2003 and currently has 380 troops in Iraq, has been having its own discussion. Ms. Ramos, for one, can find no justification. Those other mothers can say that their children fell while fighting for their country, either for the Marxist guerrilla movement or the American-backed government. But Natividad Ramos, 20, died in Najaf in a clash with armed followers of the Shiite cleric [Muktada al-Sadr](#).

“I got through our war without losing any family,” she said of El Salvador’s civil war, which took an estimated 75,000 lives. “And now my son was sent to fight in someone else’s war.”

Officially, Mr. Saca’s government says the deployment of what is called the Cuscatlán Battalion is a way to thank the world for its assistance in helping stop the civil war here a decade and a half ago. Salvadoran officials say their country is an active part of the [United Nations](#) and believe in the world body’s effort to rebuild Iraq.

They stress the humanitarian dimension to their soldiers’ work there, like building roads, health clinics and schools, while acknowledging the dangers that have resulted in the deaths of five soldiers and the wounding of about two dozen more. They proudly note that El Salvador’s army, once linked to right-wing death squads, has been purged of its bad elements and is now one of the most respected institutions in the country.

But those arguments have not been enough to sway local critics. A newspaper opinion poll put opposition to El Salvador’s involvement in Iraq at 81 percent. In 2004, masked protesters briefly took over the country’s main cathedral and demanded an immediate withdrawal of troops. For the most part, though, Salvadorans have been preoccupied with local concerns, such as their economic woes and the insecurity that causes strains in their own country.

Every time a new contingent is sent, though, the legislature splits along party lines, with the right-wing government and its allies backing the plan and the leftist opposition voting no.

“It’s the gringos’ war,” said one critic, Olga Serrano, who is executive secretary of a group of wounded veterans from the war in the 1980s. “What are we doing over there?”

Behind the scenes, government officials sell the plan differently. They point to all the benefits they believe they are receiving from Washington as a result of their assistance, even as the Bush administration insists that it is not giving El Salvador special favors for its troop presence.

“We’re doing this to help the Iraqis but we’re also doing this for our own people,” said Carlos Rolando Herrarte Rivas, a legislator from the center-right Christian Democratic Party who went to Iraq in December as part of a government delegation to visit the troops. “The president can’t say that but that’s why we’re doing it.”

Mr. Herrarte, a retired colonel, said the Bush administration had been treating Salvadoran migrants well despite strong anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. He pointed to the Bush administration’s decision in January 2005 to grant a one-year extension of temporary protected status for about 250,000 Salvadorans living in the United States. The status gives them a reprieve from deportation because of natural disasters or political turmoil at home.

Mr. Herrarte also cited the \$461 million in antipoverty funds that El Salvador was awarded last fall by the Millennium Challenge Corporation, an American foreign aid agency, as being another outgrowth of the war effort.

“When I go to my town, they yell,” he said of his vociferous antiwar constituents. “They want to know why we are there. They say, ‘Get them out.’ Then I start explaining how this is helping our people in the United States.”

To say that El Salvador and the United States are joined at the hip is an understatement. Nearly a third of native-born Salvadorans are living in the United States, including relatives of President Saca, Defense Minister Otto Alejandro Romero Orellana and many other decision makers. Those Salvadorans abroad send home about \$2.5 billion every year, which represents about 17 percent of the country’s gross domestic product.

Former President Francisco Guillermo Flores Pérez, who was considered especially close to the White House, sent the first troops to Iraq in 2003. The issue came up in the presidential campaign the following year when Mr. Saca, a pro-American businessman, defeated Schafik Handal, a former Communist guerrilla.

Mr. Handal had pledged to withdraw Salvador's 380 soldiers from Iraq immediately. Mr. Saca said a victory by Mr. Handal ran the risk of cutting the flow of money from Salvadoran migrants in the United States.

Mr. Saca has continued sending troops even though the governing Nationalist Republican Alliance party, known as Arena, lacks a majority in the legislature. Mr. Saca's party has had to strike deals with two smaller parties to come up with the 43-vote simple majority.

The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, an outgrowth of the guerrilla movement that fought the government in the 1980s, has consistently voted against the war.

Critics of decision to send Salvadoran troops point out that Nicaragua, Honduras and Dominican Republic continued to have strong relationships with Washington, even though they pulled their troops out of Iraq in the spring of 2004.

They point out that Hondurans and Nicaraguans also have the same preferred [immigration](#) status that Salvadorans do. Honduras and Nicaragua also received Millennium grants, albeit smaller ones than El Salvador's, critics note.

Salvadoran officials are not speaking of an increase in troops to quell the Iraqi insurgency. But when they are asked how long the country plans to involve itself in the war, they do adopt President Bush's language: as long as it takes.